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USA TODAY
29 May 1986

COVER STORY

Supersecret spy agency out in open

By Sam Meddis
USA TODAY

On Oct. 24, 1952 — without a hint of publicity — President Harry S. Truman scrawled his name across the bottom of a seven-page top secret memo.

That memo, says intelligence expert James Bamford, "was the birth certificate for America's newest and most secret agency ... the eavesdrop-

ping equivalent of the H-bomb."

Born in deepest secrecy, the National Security Agency has quietly spread its electronic ears around the world.

True to its pedigree, the agency refuses to talk about its work. But there is little doubt it has successfully poked into other nations' communications — from Third-World Libya to superpower Soviet Union. At its disposal is a dazzling, far-flung array of satellites, ships, submarines, jets and ground-based "antenna farms." They may intercept signals from other satellites, radio transmitters, sonar, radar, microwave towers and underwater cables.

Until recently, the nearly 34-year-old NSA — like its high-flying spy planes — has been comfortably hidden from view. Now the espionage trial of former NSA communications specialist Ronald Pelton — which continues in Baltimore today — has sent the agency's cherished anonymity into a tailspin.

Everybody from President Reagan to CIA Director William Casey is upset over media interest in the case.

Last week, Casey asked the Justice Department to prosecute NBC News after a *Today* show report said Pelton may have betrayed a long-running intelligence project.

But the threat hasn't scared off the media. Wednesday, about a half-dozen TV cameras staked out Baltimore's federal courthouse. Inside, some 50 reporters sat in the Pelton trial courtroom, hungry for tidbits about the supersecret agency.

The NSA — with an estimated 90,000 workers — collects about 85 percent of the USA's foreign intelligence, says Bamford, who wrote a book on the agency, *The Puzzle Palace*.

Its \$5 billion to \$10 billion annual budget dwarfs the CIA's \$2 billion. Each year, the NSA generates an awesome 24,000 tons of classified paper documents, computer tapes and photos.

The agency's headquarters in Fort Meade, Md., is like a 1,000-acre security bunker, triple-ringed with cyclone, barbed-wire and electrified fences.

With a topsy-turvy kind of logic, the brain of the NSA complex is in a huge basement. There, an area the size of several city blocks cradles the world's fastest, smartest computers.

They use what's known in intelligence circles as "brute force" to crush foreign codes and help create unbreakable ones for some 18 government agencies. Codes the president needs to authorize a nuclear strike are brewed there.

"We've built up this tremendous technical capacity," said

American University's Jeffrey T. Richelson, who wrote *The U.S. Intelligence Community*.

The intelligence "take" is believed to be vast, involving such matters, as, say, the status of the Soviet grain harvest, the build-up of Soviet troops on the Polish border or instructions from Moscow to its Third World embassies.

Among the high-tech systems the NSA and sister agencies now use, says Richelson:

- A photo-reconnaissance "Key-Hole" satellite that can detect objects 4 inches wide. Six-stories tall and weighing 30,000 pounds, the one orbiting KH-11 satellite provides ground stations with nearly instant pictures on TV monitors.

- About nine SR-71 spy planes — nicknamed "Blackbirds" because of their black, heat-resistant paint. They fly a sky-scorching 3,000-plus miles per hour up to 85,000 feet high. They can film 60,000 square miles an hour. They're supposedly capable of spotting a mailbox on a country road.

- Probably three SIGINT (signal intelligence) satellites. Named Chalet and Magnum, they hover at stationary positions — 22,300 miles above the equator — and intercept electronic communications and missile information.

- An assortment of specially equipped Boeing 707s, Sturgeon 637-class subs and Navy frigates and destroyers — all packed with sensitive electronic gear. Such ships have been used to collect intelligence on targets in Nicaragua.

Technologically, the Soviets are "a long way behind" the USA, Richelson said. It wasn't until 1984 that the Soviets put up a satellite like the KH-11 — a system the USA had in 1976.

By the end of this decade, USA satellites will have made another technological leap — with heat and radar sensors that can "see" in the dark, Richelson said.

The trend could put more and more James Bonds out of work. "The more advanced you get technologically, the more money you spend on that and the less you rely on human agents," said Bamford.

That may be why officials are so edgy about publicity: "Technical" intelligence — replacing human spies with machines — is one of the major powers' hottest pursuits.

"It's a constant cat-and-mouse game," said Paul Stares, a military space expert at the Brookings Institution.

At times, the game gets rough — as with the 1960 shooting down of the U-2 spy plane of Francis Gary Powers over Soviet territory, the Israeli attack on the intelligence-gathering ship USS Liberty during the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1968 capture of the spy ship USS Pueblo by the North Koreans.

But intelligence agencies run such risks because rewards of electronic espionage can be enormous.

Perhaps the biggest coup: The interception and decoding of German military messages in World War II — a project code-named Ultra. The operation allowed Allied commanders to defeat the wolfpacks of U-boats in 1943 — and helped turn the tide in the Battle in the Atlantic.

Electronic eavesdropping apparently also was behind the USA's ability to give a minute-by-minute account of Soviet communications leading to the 1983 attack on the Korean Air Lines flight 007 jumbo jet.

In April, decoding of Libyan diplomatic cables reportedly gave President Reagan the "smoking gun" evidence he needed to send warplanes to attack Libya. Reagan could confidently say the intercepted messages directly linked Libya to the terrorist bombing of a West Berlin disco that month.

But there's a big tradeoff: Though fewer agents are needed, more desk-bound functionaries are required to run such a system — making it highly vulnerable to leaks.

Prosecutors say Pelton — accused of selling secrets to the Soviets for a petty \$35,000 — is such an example.

"The NSA is absolutely vital to our security — it's worth its weight in missiles," says Georgetown University intelligence expert Allan Goodman. "But you can never be sure if you're penetrated or not."